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ABSTRACT

The Florida Cabinet has decided to accept a significant decrease in the number of individuals completing college degrees, as long as those who do graduate are able to pass the College Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST) at a considerably higher level than is presently required. Under the new standards, only 48% of the first-time CLAST examinees are expected to pass the test, and the impact on minorities will be even more severe. The new CLAST standards are based on the assumption that improvements in Florida's high school education during the 1980's would raise graduates' academic competence and skills base. This has not happened. Over the past 10 years, the percentage of students enrolling at Miami-Dade Community College with skills deficiencies has remained between 61% and 66%. After two years of community college education, few of these students have been able to improve their competencies enough to pass CLAST at the new levels. The real objective is not to require higher competencies of a smaller number of individuals, but rather to significantly increase the percentage of the total population who have the academic skills required for productive employment. Only 37.9% of American high school students are tracked into academic curricula, but 71% of them will actually proceed to some form of higher education and 80% of the jobs available will require some postsecondary education. As a result of high school tracking, 30% of the entering college students will be underprepared for college-level work, and many will fail or drop out. To remedy these problems, high schools must begin to operate on the assumption that a large percentage of their graduates will require strong academic skills. In addition, parents must involve themselves in the education of their children and provide the support and motivation that fosters a commitment to education. (AYC)

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# FLORIDIANS AT RISK OF LOSING HIGHER EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY

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Because of a new state policy, the opportunity for substantial numbers of Floridians to complete a college education is now at serious risk. The Florida Cabinet has decided to accept a significant decrease in the number of individuals completing associate and bachelor degrees, as long as those who do graduate are able to pass the College Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST) at a considerably higher level than presently required. Of greatest concern is that most of the individuals who will be excluded from further education would succeed in completing baccalaureate degrees, were it not for the new test requirements.

## The CLAST Situation

The seriousness of this problem can best be understood by reviewing CLAST results for 1988-89. Statewide, including community college and university students, only 48 percent of the first-time test-takers would have passed at the standards proposed for 1990. At Miami-Dade Community College, only 59 percent of the 1988-89 graduates would have been eligible to graduate under the standards that went into effect in October 1989, and only 33 percent under the standards proposed for 1990. The impact on minorities would be particularly severe: the number of Black students forecast to pass CLAST could be reduced by as much as three-quarters, and Hispanic students by two-thirds. In addition, those students who begin college work in English-as-a-Second-Language courses have little prospect of meeting the 1990 standards. The new CLAST standards were adopted based on the assumption that improvements in Florida's high school education program during the 1980s would raise the

academic competence of high school graduates, and colleges would receive students with a stronger skills base from which to begin. This has not happened. Over the past ten years, the percentage of Miami-Dade students who test deficient at admission has remained between 61 and 66 percent. Statewide, more than half of the students entering community colleges are academically deficient and, over the past four years, the number required to take College Preparatory work (courses which underprepared students must take prior to beginning regular college work) has increased by one-third. Based on past performance, students who test academically deficient at college admission are under a severe handicap -- few will be able to improve competencies enough to pass CLAST at the new levels after two years of community college education.

The present situation places exceedingly high expectations on community colleges. There has been no improvement in the percentage of underprepared students entering from high school, yet a much higher exit standard from the sophomore year has been imposed. Community colleges enroll the majority of underprepared students, most of whom do not take an academic curriculum in high school. Community colleges are working diligently to adjust curriculum and practices to relate directly to CLAST in order to help more students pass the higher CLAST standards. However, success will be severely limited unless there is quantitative improvement in the information competencies (the ability to find, read, analyze, interpret, and communicate information) that students bring from high school.

Education Not Meeting Information-Age Needs

While the problems of underprepared students are not unique to Florida, the CLAST decisions have exacerbated the situation. There is

such a significant mismatch between the current information competencies of Americans and those needed for employability in the information age that the well-being of this nation is seriously threatened. Yet each year we continue to add large numbers of young adults who have insufficient academic skills for information-age employment. Statistics regarding the decline in academic competence are abundant and familiar. SAT scores declined for 13 straight years, until bottoming out two years ago; 25 percent of the 2.4 million high school graduates cannot read at the eighth grade level, while one million drop out annually; and the National Assessment of Educational Progress reports shockingly that 61 percent of America's 17-year-olds cannot read or understand high school level material--essentially the level of printed material in The Miami Herald. A recent study indicates that the typical American high school student spends one hour per week on homework and 35 hours per week watching television. The problem of inadequate academic skills is even more alarming for minorities, yet we will have to depend increasingly on minorities to fill job opportunities in the future.

Concurrent with this national decline in information skills, information age business and industry are requiring a more highly skilled workforce. Since World War II, the percent of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs has decreased from 80 percent to 20 percent. According to Peter Drucker, information-age workers in America will have to hold themselves to a standard of excellence that has not been required of them in the past. Surveys of industry indicate that the skills they desire in beginning employees are virtually identical to the skills colleges want in entering freshmen. Both seek individuals who have learned how to learn, who have problem-solving, critical thinking, and

communications competence in reading, writing and computation. These skills have become fundamental occupational skills--they are necessary for all Americans. The mismatch between the limited academic skills gained in American high schools and those required for productive employment threatens to produce a significant social underclass, permanently dependent on others, while at the same time crippling American industry's competitiveness in a global economy. According to Florida Workforce 2000:

> As jobs require high skill levels, most new workers will come from groups that traditionally have been the least literate and had the poorest access to education: non-whites, women and immigrants. Over the next decade they will make up five-sixths of all new workers in Florida. They will supply 80 percent of the state's new workforce by the year 2000.

Thus we face an extremely dangerous circumstance. Florida may be able to boast that all college graduates demonstrate higher academic skills. However, the real issue is not to require higher competencies from a small number of individuals, but rather to significantly increase the percentage of the total population who have greater competence.

The High School Tracking Problem

Since 25 percent of students are dropping out of high school, one must conclude that the 75 percent remaining need a strong academic foundation to be employable. Yet the mind-set of American high schools seems to be stuck in the 1950s, operating as if only one-third of all high school graduates require an academic curriculum. A major national study has shown that only 37.9 percent of American high school students are enrolled in an academic curriculum, but six years after high school graduation, 71 percent actually proceed to some form of postsecondary education. This closely matches industry forecasts that 80 percent of the jobs in America will require postsecondary education in the years

immediately ahead. As a result, 30 percent of entering college students nationally are classified as "underprepared," and very high dropout and failure rates occur. An increase in the hard-core unemployed is another result of high schools producing students without the skills needed by either college or industry, thus adding to the large group who have little prospect of making a productive contribution to society.

In Florida, the majority of students who attend community colleges have not been prepared in an academic track. Therefore, it is no surprise that the majority test academically deficient, and that dropout and failure rates are high. Miami-Dade Community College enjoys a nationwide reputation for raising the competency of students entering with deficiencies. Our graduates are presently succeeding in the workplace and in the university upper division. But, with significantly higher CLAST scores, many fewer will proceed to the next level of education. Henceforth, students must enter our open door with much better preparation to have a reasonable chance to continue. Ohterwise, the state of Florida will face an increasingly competitive world with a severe lack of cultivated talent.

Why does tracking occur? Within the schools, advisors and counselors respond to individual student attitudes, rather than the requirements of the new world of work. If a student appears uninterested and unmotivated, he or she will most usually be put into a track that has low expectations and does not encourage students to prepare for postsecondary education. Unfortunately, there is significant research to show that once this process begins it becomes self-fulfilling.

What Can Be Done?

Two steps are essential, particularly in Florida with the new CLAST requirements. First, high schools must operate on the accurate assumption that a large percentage of graduates will require strong academic skills; second, parents must involve themselves in the education of their children. They must understand, for example, that the functional literacy test required for graduation from Florida's public high schools covers only minimal learning and in no way indicates preparation for postsecondary education or readiness for employment in the information age. Parents must understand that [redacted] courses are offered at multiple levels: the fact that a student is taking senior-level English may be a solid course for one student and something entirely different to another.

Learning boils down to two essentials: time-on-task and motivation. Students may encounter an extraordinary teacher here or there, one who is able to motivate even those whose environment does not foster a commitment to education. However, this is an exceptional circumstance. If there is to be consistent and lasting improvement, the home and neighborhood environment must convey to students the message that school is important. Parents and guardians particularly must be interested and supportive, and must place high value on academic achievement. Further, there must be esteem and encouragement for the critical role of teachers, many of whom feel unsupported when they raise student expectations. The result would be more motivated students with greater willingness to devote additional time-on-task.

Parental involvement can have dramatic impact on a child's educational process. Studies have shown that when parents involve themselves

academic achievement rises, student behavior improves, student motivation increases, dropout rates decline, and attitude toward homework is more positive; and students who do more homework earn better grades. Homework can make an important difference. One study indicated that lower-ability students who did one to three hours of homework a week had grades equal to average-ability students who did none. Average-ability students who did three to five hours of homework a week had grades equal to high-ability students who did none. Thus we see that when parental involvement conveys a belief in the importance of school, and when parents support teachers and insist on homework, the result is a significant positive difference.

It must be understood that the rules have changed in Florida. Community colleges can help, but significant improvement is essential prior to college admission. Parents must recognize that their children may lose the opportunity to complete higher education or to gain the skills required for employment, unless the academic competencies gained in high school increase. There is little prospect of achieving that increase unless they involve themselves directly and consistently in the education of their children.

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